

DEATH

Notes taken during the seminars in Sri Lanka, 1979 and during discussions with Khun Sujin in Bangkok 1979.

'Neither in the sky nor in mid-ocean, nor by entering a cleft
in the mountains is found a place where abiding himself, death will
not overcome him.'

Dhammapada, v.128

In the Visuddhimagga reference is made to death (marana) as 'the interruption of the life faculty included within (the limits of) a single becoming (existence)'. Death can also refer to 'death as termination (cutting off), in other words, the Arahant's termination of the suffering of the round....' Thirdly, death can refer to 'momentary death, in other words, the momentary dissolution of formations....'

The Buddha taught many reminders to show how the first kind of death is the natural course for the living being. In the Salla Sutta (The Arrow, Sutta Nipata, vv. 574-593) we read:

'Just as the pots made by a potter all end by being broken, so death is (the breaking up) of life... Of those overcome by death and passing to another world, a father cannot hold back his son, nor relatives a relation. See! While the relatives are looking on and weeping, one by one each mortal is led away like an ox to the slaughter. In this manner the world is afflicted by death and decay. But the wise do not grieve having realised the nature of the world... If any benefit is gained by lamenting the wise would do it, only a fool would harm himself. Yet through weeping and sorrowing the mind does not become calm, but still more suffering is produced, the body is harmed. One becomes lean and pale, - one merely hurts oneself.... He who seeks happiness should withdraw the arrow: his own lamentations, longings and grief. With the arrow withdrawn, unattached, he would attain to peace of mind; and when all sorrow has been transcended he is sorrow-free and has realised Nibbana.'

In the Visuddhimagga (Ch VIII, 6), we are told that one should look here and there at beings that have been killed or have died, and advert to the death of beings already dead but formerly seen enjoying good things, doing so with mindfulness, with a sense of urgency and with knowledge, after which he can exercise his attention in the way beginning 'Death will take place'. By so doing he exercises it wisely.... It also suggests that the recollecting should be done thus, 'Just as a murderer appears with a sword, thinking 'I shall cut this man's head off', and applies it to his neck, so death appears'. Why? Because it comes with birth and it takes away life.' A little further on it is emphasised in the Visuddhimagga (Ch VIII, 15) that:

'Furthermore, all health ends in sickness, all youth ends in ageing, all life ends in death; all worldly existence is procured by birth, haunted by ageing, surprised by sickness, and struck down by death. Hence it is said:

As though huge mountains made of rock
So vast they reached up to the sky
Were to advance from every side,
Grinding beneath them all that lives,
So age and death roll over all,
Warriors, priests, merchants, and craftsmen,
The outcastes and the scavengers,
Crushing all beings, sparing none.
And here no troops of elephants,
No charioteers, no infantry,
No strategy in form of spells,
No riches, serve to beat them off'.

This is how death should be recollected as the 'ruin of success' by defining it as death's final ruining of life's success.'

Khun Sujin pointed out that one has less attachment to what one clings to when one often thinks of death. One knows 'when one thinks of death correctly it can calm down other moments of akusala.' In the Gradual Sayings (Book of the Threes, Threefold Pride, 38), after the description of the dangers of pride in youth and health we are encouraged to see the dangers of attachment and pride in life:

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'An ignorant, ordinary person is sure to die himself and cannot escape death; yet when seeing a dead person, he feels depressed, vexed or repelled, being forgetful of his own situation. Now, I too am sure to die and cannot escape death. If when seeing a dead person I should feel depressed, vexed or repelled, that would not be proper for one like myself.' When I thus reflected, O monks, all pride in life vanished.

Wise consideration of death can also help us see the folly of attachment to a person or to a name. In Bangkok we discussed the Jāra Sutta (Sutta Nipāta, vv. 804-813) with Khun Sujin:

'Short indeed is this life, this side of an hundred years one dies; whoever lives long even he dies from old age. People grieve for things they are attached to, yet there exist no permanent possessions but just a state of (constant) separation.... As a man awakened from sleep no longer sees what happened in his dream, similarly one does not see a loved one who is dead. Those people who were seen and heard and called by their names as such and such, only their names remain when they have passed away.... A sage who is completely independent does not make close friends nor enemies. In him sorrow and selfishness do not stay, like water on a lotus leaf. As a lotus is not wetted by water, so a sage is not affected by what is seen or heard, nor by what is perceived by the other senses....'

There are many Suttas which discuss the danger of attachment to the body and how death and wise reflection on the corpse can calm the mind. If there is some understanding that what one is so attached to is only nāma and rūpa, that is what will be most helpful. In the Commentary to the Dhammapada (Kāla junior and Kāla senior, Book One, Pairs) we read that Kāla senior becomes a Burning-grounder and attains Arahatsip by contemplating the corpse of a beautiful girl:

'So he went and caused the dress which covered the corpse to be removed, and surveyed the body from the soles of the feet to the tips of the hair. Then he said 'Throw this beautiful golden hued body into the fire, and so soon as the tongues of fire have laid hold of it, please tell me'.... The Elder came and surveyed the body. Where the flames had touched the flesh, the color of her body was like that of a mottled cow; the feet stuck out and hung down; the hands were curled back; the forehead was without skin. The Elder thought to himself, 'This body which but now caused those who looked thereon to forget the sacred word, has but now attained decay, has but now attained death....'....'

'Impermanent are all existing things. It is their nature to come into existence and to decay.

They come into existence and perish. It is well when they have ceased to be'.

In the Visuddhimagga we are also reminded of the dangers of attachment to life and this body. It reminds us about the 'frailty of life' (Ch. VIII, 27):

'This life is impotent and frail. For the life of beings is bound up with the postures, it is bound up with cold and heat, it is bound up with the primary elements, and it is bound up with nutriment.

Life occurs only when the in-breaths and out-breaths occur evenly. But when the wind in the nostrils that has gone outside does not go in again, or when that which has gone inside does not come out again, then a man is reckoned to be dead.'

It also describes (Ch VIII, 29) how death is 'signless' or indefinable:

'...The meaning is that it is unpredictable. For in the case of all beings,
The span, the sickness, and the time, and where
The body will be laid, the destiny:
The living world can never know these things;
There is no sign foretells when they will be.'

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Carrying on the story, fantasizing.... the whole thing can go on and on and on, short or long depending, but in both cases it's just visible object for a moment and the same with each doorway. Banares, the Hotel de Paris, this garden and all the people sitting in it talking about Dhamma; put them together in one moment of citta, which is in fact what is happening because we have the concept of all of that in one moment of citta, and then suppose we should die at this moment and as the citta containing the world, the Hotel de Paris, Banares falls away, so does Banares, so does the Hotel de Paris, so do all the people sitting in the Hotel de Paris, never to appear again. The only reason that it seems to us that Banares and the Hotel de Paris and the people sitting in the garden talking about Dhamma exist is because of 'taa ruang', carrying on the story....'

On the tape, Khun Sujin then reminds everyone to develop awareness, to separate each doorway, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body-sense and mind-door and this must lead to more detachment.

The Buddha often emphasises the urgency of developing awareness of realities and reminds us of the danger of sense desires. in the Potaliya Sutta (Middle Length Sayings, no. 54) we read:

'.... It is as if, householder, a person carrying a flaming torch of dry-grass, were to go against the wind. What do you think, householder? If that person did not get rid of it at once, that flaming torch of dry grass would burn his hand, or arm, or some other part of his body; and, in consequence, he would suffer death, or misery comparable to that of death.

'.. In exactly the same way, householder, the noble disciple reflects thus: 'It was said by the Blessed One that sense-desires are like a torch of dry grass..... and he cultivates that constant equanimity, dependent on unity, where worldly desires and clinging perish utterly and without a remainder.'

The Buddha continues to say how sense-desires are also like a pit of glowing embers:

'.. It is as if, householder, there were a pit of glowing embers, deeper than the height of a man, filled with glowing embers free from flame and smoke; and a person desiring to live and not wishing to die, longing for happiness and loathing pain, were to come; and two strong men were to seize that person by each arm and drag him towards the pit of glowing embers. What do you think, householder? Would that person struggle this way and that?...

In the Visuddhimagga we are also reminded about the limitedness of the extent of life and how one should act as if one's head is burning (Ch. VIII, 35):

'..the extent of human life is short now. One who lives long lives a hundred years, more or less. Hence the Blessed One said: 'Bhikkhus, this human life span is short. There is a new life to be gone to, there are profitable (deeds) to be done, there is the life of purity to be led. There is no not dying for the born. ...'

'The life of human kind is short;
A wise man holds it in contempt
And acts as one whose head is burning;
Death will never fail to come.'

We read in the Gradual Sayings (The Divine Messengers, Book of the Threes, 35) about the person 'whose conduct is immoral in deeds, words and thoughts. Being of such immoral conduct, he, on dissolution of the body, after death, is reborn in states of woe, in a realm of misery, in the lower worlds, in a hell.' He's seized by both arms and taken before Yama the Lord (of Death) who asks if he did not see the first divine messenger of old age, the second divine messenger of sickness and the third divine messenger of death. Concerning the last we read:

'But, my good man, have you not seen among people a woman or a man who had died one day ago or two, or three days ago, the corpse being swollen, discoloured and festering?'

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'Yes, Lord, this I have seen.'

'Then, my good man, did it never occur to you who are intelligent and old enough, 'I too am subject to death and cannot escape it. Let me now do noble deeds by body, speech and mind?'

'No, Lord, I could not do it. I was negligent.'

'Through negligence, my good man, you have failed to do noble deeds by, body, speech and mind.... Well, as it befits your negligence, you will be treated. That evil action of yours was not done by mother or father, brothers, sisters, friends or companions, nor by relatives, devas, recluses or brahmins. But you alone have done that evil deed, and you will have to experience the fruit thereof.'

Then, having questioned, examined and addressed the man concerning the third divine messenger, King Yama became silent.

Thereupon the warders of hell (inflicted many kinds of torment on him), on account of which he suffers grievous severe, sharp and bitter pain. Yet he does not die until that evil deed of his has been worked out.'

The understanding that death can come at any time should be a reminder to see the urgency of developing all kinds of wholesome mental states. We read in the Visuddhimagga (IX, 75) that for one who sees the value and develops mettā, 'He dies unconfused: there is no dying deluded for one who abides in loving-kindness. He passes away undeluded as if falling asleep.'

Khun Sujin pointed out that 'it's only by understanding more about reality now and the momentary death at this moment that we will understand conventional death clearer and know the way to develop more wisdom which will eradicate the cause for being born eventually with the final death moment', the Visuddhinagga says (Ch. VIII, 39):

'In the ultimate sense the life-moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single moment. Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls, (the circumference touches the ground,) only on one point, so the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased, as it is said: 'In a past-consciousness he did live, in a future-consciousness he will live. In a present-consciousness he does live, he does not live. In the present moment, life, person, pleasure, pain, joy, grief, all these things join in one conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, aggregates of those dead are all alike, gone never to be born. No (world is) born if (consciousness) is not produced; when that is present, when consciousness dissolves, the highest sense this consciousness has is the end of life.'

In the Minor Readings and Illustrations, the value of seeing the momentary nature of Buddha's teachings throughout:

'And one who comes to dispassion as void because of the words 'for the six bases in oneself' is not attached to the five aggregates because of their being as void. Eventually makes an end of suffering. King Mortality, according as 'And he that looks upon 'Regarding it as but a moment 'Regarding it as but a moment 'Is out of sight of Death'

For the arahat who has eradicated all defilements through fully developed understanding of the realities of life, there is final death. We read in the Minor Readings and Illustrator (VI, The Jewel Discourse, 118):

'The old past-time action (kamma) is, although it has already arisen and ceased, still unconsumed for (ordinary) creatures since it is still capable of inducing their rebirth-linking owing to their not having abandoned the (germ-softening) moisture of craving; (but) there are those in whom the moisture of craving has been dried out by the Arahant path and for whom that old action is (thus) consumed, like germs burnt up by fire, since it is no more capable of giving any ripening in the future; then any action of theirs occurring right now as honouring the Enlightened One, etc., is called 'the new'; (but) they are those for whom it no more gives being since, owing to the abandonment of craving, it is no more capable of fruiting in the future than the flower of a plant whose roots have been cut, and these, from whose cognizance lust for new (future) being has faded with the abandoning of craving are the bhikkhus with taints consumed (exhausted) (called) '(with) the germ consumed' because the (action-resultant) rebirth-linking consciousness, stated thus... has been consumed with the consumption (exhaustion) of action; and then, because the zeal that there formerly was for the renewal of being called 'growth' has been abandoned precisely by abandoning the origin (of suffering) they have no more zeal for growth as they formerly had because no more being is given at the time of death....'

The Buddha pointed out how each being is caught in the succession of births and rebirths to endure 'manifold and various pains', and a 'joy is it when that succession ends'. By pointing out the 'advantage of that end, the disaster involved in that succession', the Buddha instigated us to get beyond birth, and old age, and disease, and death by the realisation of the final end of that succession of rebirths. Nagasena points out to King Milinda that this is the sense which led the Blessed One to instigate us (to put an end to life). We read (The Questions of King Milinda, IV, On Suicide):

".... Just, O King, as the water rained down upon the Himalaya mountain flows, in its course along the Ganges, and pebbles and gravel, whirlpools and eddies and rapids, and branches of trees which obstruct and oppose its passage, the stumps has each being caught in the succession of births and rebirths just so to endure such and such manifold and various pains....'

We also read in 'The Questions of King Milinda (IV, The Fear of Death) that all except the arahats are attached to life:

'Death, great king, is a condition which those who have not seen the truth are afraid of. About it this people is anxious and full of dread. Whosoever is afraid of a black snake, or an elephant or lion or tiger or leopard or bear or hyena or wild buffalo or gayal, or of fire or water, or of thorns or spikes or arrows, it is in each case of death that he is really in dread, and therefore afraid of them. This, O king, is the majesty of the essential nature of death. And all beings not free from sin are in dread and quake before its majesty. In this sense it is that even the beings in purgatory, who long to be released from it, are afraid of death.'

In Bangkok there was also some discussion about fear of death. There can be fear of losing a 'self' or one can be attached to another personality. We read in the 'Gradual Sayings' (Book of the Fours, Fear of Death, 164) that the Brahmin Jānussoṇi thought that there 'is no mortal who does not fear death and is not afraid of it'. The Buddha replies:

'There is, Brahmin, a person who is not free from lust for sense pleasures, not free from the desire and affection for them, not free from thirsting and fevering (after them), not free from craving (for sense pleasures). Then it happens that a grave illness befalls him. Thus afflicted by grave illness, the thought comes to him: 'Oh, those beloved sense pleasures will leave me, and I shall have to leave them! Thereupon he grieves and is worried, he laments, beats his breast and is deeply perturbed. This mortal, Brahmin, is one who fears death and is afraid of it.'

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